

On Task (2): Gentleness & Respect

1 Peter 3:15

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Some years ago, CNN reported that a group of American soldiers were moving to the home of one of Iraq's leading holy men, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Hussein Sistani, seeking his crucial support for their stay in this southern Iraqi city.

They were from the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, a group known as "a rapidly deployable battalion that is lethal, ruthless, violent, feared in combat."

As they turned a corner, a group of Iraqi men blocked their way. Shouting in Arabic, "God is great," the crowd grew into hundreds, many of whom mistakenly thought the Americans were trying to capture the town's holy man and attack the Imam Ali Mosque, a holy site for Shiite Muslims around the world. Someone in the crowd lobbed a rock at the troops, then another.

The unit commander, Lt. Col. Chris Hughes, yelled to his troops: "Smile, relax." Then he commanded his soldiers to take a knee and point their weapons to the ground. Some Iraqis backed off and sat down. But many more continued to yell and block the road.

"We're going to withdraw out of this situation and let them defuse it themselves," he told his troops through a loudspeaker. "All vehicles turn around."

Not all commanders would have done it that way. But Hughes kept his cool as two cultures almost clashed. With his own rifle pointed toward the ground, the colonel bowed to the crowd and turned away. Hughes and his infantry marched back to their compound in silence. And when tempers had calmed, the Grand Ayatollah Sistani issued a decree calling on the people of Najaf to welcome Hughes' soldiers.

Over the last 20 or so years there's been a remarkable shift in Canadian culture. By and large people have become suspicious of and defensive against representatives of Jesus. As Doug Pollock notes in his book, *God Space*, they anticipate, and are totally prepared for any direct attack on the holy places and sacred shrines of their hearts. (*God Space*, p.23)

People expect a verbal attack that says, "*I'm right, and you're wrong – and let me tell you why.*" And so it becomes an us-vs-them standoff, instead of an open conversation. They may even begin heaving verbal rocks at us.

And the question for us becomes – do we attack? Or find a new way to engage?

Have any of you personally experienced that sort of suspicion and resistance?

Recently, a blog comment on the CBC News website said:

"I cannot see a lot of young gay people, pregnant girls, even bullied kids going anywhere near a Christian counselor. I also would not want my kids anywhere near someone who blindly follows an organized religion for advice."

Then there was this interesting blog from an activist protesting oil fracking near the Finger Lakes in NY state last Fall. She wrote:

"Down the line, I found myself blockading alongside Christians. I am **not** a person of faith; and being around them threw me off my game. I know Christianity's come a long ways since the Crusades (*and even the 1980's*), but I've learned to be wary around the faithful. When one of my

neighbors on the line confesses she's an atheist, I nearly embrace her... There is something unnerving about being surrounded by people in religious clothing, and the size of some of those crosses they wear around their necks makes me feel a little faint...."

(Utne Reader, spring 2017)

Some weeks ago, I happened to wander into the church kitchen while a community group was using the hall. Met someone I know from elsewhere. We got to chatting, and somewhere, somehow, I got to asking if this was her first time in a church. Immediately the colour in her neck went red, and it crept up to her face and ears. She was HUGELY uncomfortable – that was clear.

I realized my gaff, and had to work hard to get past that sense of feeling threatened; worried that this preacher was going to bark up one side of her and down the other for having wandered away from the particular expression of church that she remembered as a child.

The walls are big.
Defenses are up.
People across Canada are armed and ready for religious attacks.

Welcome to #2 in our series, *On Task*. We're basing our teaching on the wonderful teaching material *God Space*, prepared by Doug Pollock.

It's designed to help friends of Jesus learn how to effectively share good news and hope in Christ among people with whom we live and play and work and study.

How do we do that in our defensive, suspicious culture?
And how did it get this way?

Listen to Colossians 4:5-6, as translated in *The Message*:

Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.

What's been the history of the Church in Canada over the last 150 years?
How well have we lived this call from God's Word?

How often have we worked hard at being gracious in our speech when connecting with unbelievers? How often have we tried to bring out the best in them, rather than make sure that we showed them exactly how they were wrong, and how they needed to repent of their sin?

Or – to go back to last week's message by Pastor Wilf.....

He spoke from Matthew 13....

In verses 24-30 Jesus tells a parable of wheat planted by a farmer. At night the enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat. They both spring up and grow together. The farm hands, in their eagerness to serve the farmer, ask if they should rip out the weeds.

The wise farmer says, "No. Don't do that. 'Cause you'll make mistakes for sure, and rip out some wheat with the weeds. And we DON'T want that to happen. Just focus on cultivating the wheat."

At our council meeting last Tuesday, KCRC's elders and deacons discussed this and wondered,

"How often have we at KCRC focused on ripping out the weeds in people.... rather than focusing on cultivating the wheat – the spiritual good – within their lives... and ended up ripping out tender shoots of spiritual wheat?"

It can happen SO quickly, you know.

An unintended word – like my question to the rental guest here about ever being in a church before.

Or, perhaps, a challenge on a person's lifestyle choice.

We can blame the media for highlighting negative stories about Christians.

Problem is, of course, that the stories come from somewhere, don't they?

Residential Schools.

Leaders convicted of child abuse.

Brash TV evangelists peddling their wares and begging for your money.

We need to remember that Canada, while never a Christian country, was founded with the Church having "home field" advantage. Clergy got lots of perks. If you wanted to get anywhere in society, you had to belong to a church, just like you had to belong to the right service organization – Rotary, Lions, Masons, whatever.

And it was easy for leaders to throw their weight around. Social stigma, even eviction.

Or – and perhaps even more poisonous – just quiet tongue-wagging. I remember the scandal in our neighborhood the first Sunday we heard a lawnmower start up. You'll know your own version of that.

Or how, in small town Ontario everyone knew what he was like at work on Monday, and how different that looked from his Sunday best.

It is sadly oh so common that I encounter young adults who have been raised today with absolutely no spiritual memory.

No training of any sort.

Listen to them, and explore their past with them a bit, and you'll encounter parents that had walked away from this church or that because a door had been slammed in their face somewhere; or they'd been around double-standard behaviour too long; or the list of rules and regulations laid out for them in order to really belong just got too heavy.

Welcome to Canada in 2017. A social mindset that is suspicious and defensive. Oh, it's not that people aren't spiritual. Everyone has a spiritual place deep inside. But when it starts to itch, they may be biased against the church, and against Christians, providing an answer to the itch.

Not interested.

Know anyone like that?

Perhaps you can personally relate to some of their experiences?

May I suggest a couple of things before we go any further in our series *On Task*.

We, who no longer have the spiritual home field advantage, need to do some collective apologizing and repenting.

Perhaps for too long we have demanded that people on the outside change their behaviour, their speech, their look, and their thinking to conform to the particular religious convention we're comfortable with before we welcome them.

And we've let them know it.

Or perhaps we've been quick to label people we don't really know, or understand, as wrong or sinful – without taking the time to meet them and listen.

How much does that sound like Colossians:

Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out.

Not so much, eh?

Lord, forgive us.

Lord, have mercy!

There are two passages, in addition to the one from Colossians, we need to heed.

1 Cor 9:19-23:

19-23 Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized— whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!

The second is 1 Peter 3:15-16:

15 ...you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. 16 But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear.

What's common between these two passages? Did you notice?

Who's at the centre? Them or us?

Who's the focus? Them or us?

And what's the focus?

Ripping weeds out of their lives the instant we see them pop up?

Or sow and nurture seeds of wheat, of hope, of faith in Jesus?

Speaking of, think back to Jesus. He gave us two very clear and simple, yet all-encompassing rules for living:

1. Love God.
2. Love others.

Period. In fact, Romans 13:8-10 says that loving our neighbor is the best way to love God.

Who's the focus of that kind of living?

Them or us?

Friends, the Great Commission – the huge task given to all of us who follow Jesus – is **totally** guided by the Great Commandment.

Jesus' last word on earth, that keeps echoing in the collective memory of the Church, is - “Go!”

Then, how? How to go? How to tell? How to disciple?

Do it in an attitude of love.

Do it in a way that is not about me, my programs, my standards, my traditions – but instead is about that other person and desiring God's best for them.

Here are a few suggestions to getting into that kind of God-honoring love-zone:

1. Try not to be “anti-” In how you talk and think.

Most people out there associate Christians with being **against**.... well, whatever.

Anti-gay, anti-choice, anti-freedom, anti-fun, anti-intellectual.

Angry, illogical people who can't live at peace with people other than their own kind.

The worst about this is that people who have made choices other than our choices will probably quickly, and perhaps correctly, assume that we are also **anti**-them. That we've judged not just the actions, but also them as people. At that point, no conversations about Jesus are possible.

Get out of that box as soon as you can in your relationships with others.

2. Watch what kind of language we use.

Did you know that there's a whole in-house lingo for Christians.... *Christiansese*.....

are you saved

blood of the lamb

atonement

grace

We've got to ban these words from our vocab, and learn to say the same thing in everyday words. Let's agree to boycott that language.

3. Be respectful

James 1:19 tells us to be quick to listen and slow to speak.

Too often when we're engaged in spiritual conversations we get that turned around.

And it's not helpful.

4. Let go control

When there's a spiritual conversation, do we have to dominate the talk? What about dropping a seed here or there? Talk about Jesus doesn't always have to be on our turf. And not every conversation has to turn into a battle for who's right and who's wrong – we

don't have to "win."

What do you think?
Could we work on these?

Jim Day, head of Focus On The Family, said this recently –

We can no longer assume that most of our neighbors are Christians. Most aren't. And we can no longer pretend that we are part of some moral majority..... if there ever was such a thing....

...Where we imagine ourselves as an aggrieved and repressed remnant. And where we, as Church, engage the world to diagnose decadence and defend our own rights.

...We are no longer effective at persuasion because we lack humility. Instead of being angry, let's live as a joyful minority..

Live the truth that every human being is valuable, and broken, and in need of grace.

I love that line - "***live as a joyful minority.***"

Can we at KCRC do that?
Can we be that?

Acknowledging that we, truly, are a community of imperfect people – sharing joyful hope of a Perfect and Gracious Lord with other people who are maybe almost as imperfect as we are?

A community of imperfect people.....

You know, don't you, that this pastor has an imperfect track record of sharing Jesus.

- Given wrong advice in counselling sessions.
- Tried to rush someone towards *my* way of following Jesus, rather than helping them find their own.
- Calling them out on behaviour that wasn't really mine to call them on.
- Labelling someone something, publicly, when I've got a Saviour who isn't in the business of labels at all.

How's all this for you?

I wonder if, when we're really honest, the Holy Spirit might bring a face to our minds – one for whom we have, either consciously or unintentionally, built barriers between them and Jesus – rather than constructing a bridge across which they could travel to personally meet the Saviour.

And, if such a face comes to mind, that may a cue to pray an "*I'm sorry, God*" prayer.

And, perhaps, if opportunity presents, to say the same to the other person.

"Sorry for screwing up. Sorry for letting my wants or fears or agenda get in the way and dropped onto you."

Perhaps it might mean listening to someone and their painful story of hurt foisted on them in another place and time by other people, and saying –

"Please let me say, as someone who knows he follows Jesus imperfectly, that I am so sorry for this. So sorry that these people were unable to live out what Jesus meant. I do hope that

sometime, somewhere, you'll be able to experience the real warmth of the heart of Jesus and his true love for you."

And then, as we wonder what happens to burnt bridges, and can there ever be second chances..... remember this, that we **can** pray to God for new beginnings.

Remember – He's the Creator who made a beautiful universe out of utter darkness and chaos.

If he did that, do you think the little bit of chaos we create in this world is too much for him?

Pray for His Spirit to create new bridges. Maybe through you. Maybe through this church. Maybe through someone else. Maybe through another church.

In fact, let's pray for that right now.....